

Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas (In July) by hawkinshellfire

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Summary:

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Author's Note:

Happy Christmas in July!

Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas

Sitting on the sofa with a cup of black coffee in hand, Joyce watches as Will and El excitedly wrap the evergreen tree standing in the center of the living room with lights and tinsel. She'd never been a fan of the holidays. It was typically a tough time of year financially and she found the entire time of year extremely emotionally draining. Watching the kids excitedly work together to decorate the tree, however, brought a smile to her face.

Part of her never thought they'd get here. A seemingly normal family enjoying the holidays. After they lost Hopper and El moved in with them, things had been tough. She and Will couldn't manage to get along and the move to the West coast had everyone feeling *off*. Now that they were back in Indiana and the worst of it seemed to be behind them (she hoped). El and Will had begun to become friends like she once imagined they would and even Jonathan seemed to be in better spirits these days (though she suspected that had more to do with Nancy being nearby again).

Joyce watches Will show El how to hang the ornaments on the tree without them slipping off the branches and finishes her coffee. It was lightly snowing outside and the dim glow of the multi-coloured lights on the tree had her feeling extra light and relaxed, something she hadn't felt in a decade. The house was clean, in anticipation of the

kids' friends coming over for dinner the following day, everyone was getting along and dare she say, for the first time in forever she was enjoying the holiday season. She stares out at the snowglobe unfolding outside and lets out a deep breath. Tomorrow, gifts would be unwrapped, snowballs would be thrown and the house would be filled with laughter and cheer.

In a perfect world, she'd be in the arms of the man she loved, dancing to *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas* while the snow came down outside. The kids would be fast asleep, anxiously awaiting the arrival of Santa. She would insist that they put the gifts beneath the tree before dancing, but would find her head on his shoulder as they swayed to the music; she was drawn to him in a way she couldn't explain. The record would crack and the fire would paint the room in a deep glowing orange while they held each other, trapped in their own snow globe while the world outside was drenched in white. He would pull her closer and whisper into the top of her head, "Merry Christmas, darling." She would pull back slightly so she could look up at him and would smile, "Merry Christmas, Hop."

Three quick knocks on the door draw her out of her daydream and she wraps a blanket around her shoulders before rising and making her way towards the door.

"Hey Mrs. Byers," Steve grins.

"Present for ya from Flo," he nods, handing her a cookie tin enthusiastically.

"Thanks, Steve," she smiles, "do you want to come in for a second? I think Jonathan is just in his room and it's starting to really come down out there."

“I’m alright, gotta get back to the station. I’m pulling a double today,” he explains without being asked.

Joyce nods and listens as he continues.

“Someone requested the night off so I’ve gotta pull my weight, being the new guy and all.”

“Can I get you some coffee to go?”

“I’m all good, thanks, Mrs. Byers.” Steve adjusts the gold nameplate on the breast of his blue jacket and steps back onto the porch. “Merry Christmas,” he adds with a wave.

“You too, Steve.”

Once Steve reaches his cruiser, Joyce closes the door and shivers. The snow was really starting to come down and the fire was beginning to dwindle. She leaves the cookie tin on the table and heads over to the fireplace where she adds another log. This house was smaller than the one they lived in on the West coast, but it had a much cozier feel and Joyce loved that the fireplace quickly warmed every room.

Heading into the kitchen, Joyce begins putting the final touches on dinner and pulls her roast out of the oven.

“El, Will!” she calls, “Come help set the table!”

A few bumps and bangs later, the kids appear in the kitchen, breathless.

“Is the tree all done?” she asks them.

“All done,” El grins. Joyce reaches down and pulls a piece of hair from El’s face. Her hair had been getting too long but El insisted they not cut it and let it grow.

“Wash up and then you two can set the table,” she instructs them.

“Yes, mom,” Will chimes.

The pair take turns at the sink and then carry out the “fancier” glass plates and cups. Jonathan appears from his room and helps Joyce put the food on the table while listening to El describe the plan she’s come up with to capture Santa Clause.

While Will and Jonathan hadn’t believed in Santa for a few years, El was very much invested in the fictional man and both boys had been adamant on ensuring she enjoyed the holiday without finding out the truth. Will had even gone as far as to warn the rest of the party not to say anything. El had been deprived of so much of her childhood, the least they could do was give her this.

The four sit at the table, Will next to El and Jonathan across from them next to Joyce.

“Woah! Look at all the snow mom!” Will exclaims excitedly, looking out the window. “Do you think we can build a snowman tomorrow?”

“I don’t see why not,” she smiles.

“Are we waiting, or...?” Jonathan asks.

Before Joyce has a chance to answer, the door flings open and a snow-covered Hopper enters in his chief’s uniform.

“You guys can get started,” Joyce tells them as she stands to greet Hopper at the door.

“I was starting to think you weren’t going to make it,” she says softly as she approaches him.

“Got stuck doing some last-minute paperwork because Harrington slipped out to deliver cookies,” he whines. His eyes fall on the tin on the table and he rolls his eyes while Joyce chuckles beneath her breath,

“Dad!” El exclaims, getting up from her seat and sprinting towards Hopper. She tosses her arms around one of his legs and gives him a squeeze, then takes his hand and tugs him into the living room. Ever

since they'd rescued Hopper from Russia, El had taken to calling him, dad. She'd also begun excitedly greeting him each time he returned from work. Joyce had to admit that the relationship he and El had was adorable. Since his return, Hopper had taken up residence on the Byer's couch. When they decided it would be best for Hopper to return to Indiana so that he could readjust to life outside the prison walls, they agreed it would be best for him and El to continue to stay with the Byers until everything settled. When they returned to Indiana three months prior, the plan was for Hopper and El to find a place of their own in the new year.

"Look at our tree, dad!" He follows her around the room as she excitedly shows him her favourite decorations.

"That's beautiful, kid."

When El and Hopper return to the kitchen to join everyone for dinner, Joyce is retrieving an extra cup from the cupboard. El slides back into her seat and continues eating while asking Will an assortment of questions about the holiday traditions she'd been told about.

Before claiming his own seat, Hopper leans down behind Joyce and subtly whispers, "You look nice," in her ear. She blushes and remains facing the cupboard. His chest just barely grazes her back as he reaches over her head and grabs the cup she'd been attempting to reach. They'd been living under the same roof for months now, and while at first they'd mastered keeping their feelings at bay, lately it hadn't been easy.

After rescuing Hopper, Joyce desperately wanted to throw herself into his arms and tell him how she felt about him, but the right

moment never came and soon she found herself trapped in a charade of playing house and it all became far too complicated. So, she swallowed her feelings and did what she needed to. She helped Hopper ease back into society and continued to care for El. As time went on, they toyed with the invisible line they'd once drawn until the line ceased to exist. Two weeks ago, they'd taken that final step and she knew there was no going back now.

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On Tuesday afternoon, Hopper leaves work early and arrives home just after lunch. He expects to find an empty house and is surprised when he finds Joyce in the kitchen smoking and enjoying a cup of coffee.

"You're back early?" she looks up at him with concern.

"Headache."

"I thought you were working this afternoon?"

"Slow day. They didn't need me. Coffee?"

"I'm alright," he smiles. He grabs a cigarette from the pack in his pocket and reaches for her lighter.

They smoke in silence for a while, enjoying the comforting presence of the other until Joyce gets restless and begins to move about the kitchen.

"Since you're home, maybe we could figure out what we want to do about Christmas."

"What do you mean?"

"Gifts, decorations ... our living arrangement," she adds softly.

"Oh," he mumbles. "Right."

He'd been avoiding thinking about leaving the Byers residence. He and Joyce had stumbled upon something good here. He wasn't quite sure what it was yet, but he knew it was something.

"I guess we could go out this afternoon and pick up a few gifts. Let the kids pick a tree this weekend..."

"Okay."

"I'm looking for a place, Joyce, I really am. I'm not trying to put you guys out. Jesus, that's the last thing I want. It's just with work picking up again and El being glued to my side every time I'm not at work I haven't had as much time as I would have liked to look and..."

"Hop," she says softly, placing her palm on his bicep. "It's fine."

Fingers burning at the contact, even through the cotton fabric of his shirt, Joyce pulls away and turns towards the living room. Hopper follows her, catching up with her in the doorway. "Joyce, wait..."

He reaches for her hand and stops her. "I also... it's just ... do you think that we..."

"Do I think that we, what?"

She looks up at him, his broad shoulders taking up most of the space in the kitchen's entrance, her body inches from his.

Before he has a chance to reply, she catches sight of a piece of green suspended from the ceiling. He follows her gaze upwards and laughs.

"When did that get there?" she wonders out loud.

'El,' he explains, "I was teaching her about traditions, she must have..."

"Right."

"Joyce," he says in a whisper. She swears he takes a step towards her but their close proximity might have her imagining things.

“Hop,” she volleys, “do I think we what?”

They had been flirting nonstop since he moved in, there had been a few moments where she thought maybe, just maybe, it would happen, lingering glances and stolen touches consumed her thought and yet, nothing. But now - now they're standing in the threshold of her kitchen beneath a strand of mistletoe, their bodies so close that if she exhaled she was certain her chest would graze his torso. Her eyes meet his and for a moment, she panics. He's looking at her with such intensity that she forgets how to breathe. Before either of them can overthink it, they give in to the tension in the imaginary bubble suspending them in the doorway and his lips finally meet hers.

Finally.

Years of resolve come tumbling down with a simple kiss.

His hands settle on her hips and he tugs her into him with a thud. In a swift motion, he hoists her upwards and she wraps her legs around his center, her back hitting the door frame.

When they finally part for air, he wordlessly puts her back down on the ground and watches as her thumb traces a path along her lower lip.

“Do you think that we can do that again?”

She launches herself at him in response, arms circling around his neck. He slowly walks them back to her room. They manage to make it after

knocking over a few frames and they spend the afternoon doing the one thing that had been on both of their minds for as long as either could recall.

They don't go gift shopping. Dinner isn't ready when the kids return home.

He doesn't sleep on the couch that night. Instead, after everyone is asleep he slips into Joyce's room and they continue what they started that afternoon.

The next morning, in the early hours before the sun breaks through the clouds, they talk about what it all means. They decide to give them a shot and agree it would be best to keep things quiet while they figure things out for themselves.

Hopper never looks for a place for him and El.

Two weeks later they decide that he should stay. For good.

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When she finally turns to face him, she finds him staring at her with lust-filled eyes. They share a brief moment before Will's laughter forces their attention back to the table.

“Should we tell them now?” he asks.

“Good a time as any,” she nods.

“Tell us what?” Will asks, catching the tail end of their conversation.

“Well kid, your mom and I wanted to ask you guys how you would feel about me and El staying here a while longer?”

“How much longer?” Will asks.

“How does much *much* longer sound?” Hopper asks.

“You're moving in?” Jonathan asks.

“We get to stay?!” El squeals excitedly.

“If that’s okay with everyone, yeah kid. We get to stay.”

Immediately, El and Will start planning out potential plans with the party now that they are going to officially be roommates. Jonathan, however, stays silent and focuses his energy on his plate.

“Does this mean I have to call you dad?” Will asks Hopper innocently.

“No,” Jonathan answers for Hopper.

“No,” Hopper repeats, “You can keep calling me Hopper.”

Jonathan glances across the table at Hopper and nods appreciatively.

“This doesn’t mean anything changes around here,” Joyce chimes in.

“So dad is still going to live in the living room?” El asks innocently.

“No,” Joyce and Hopper answer at the same time, forcing Joyce to blush. Truthfully, while Hopper had been “going to sleep” on the couch, he hadn’t spent the night there in weeks.

“I think it might be better if your dad and I shared my room,” Joyce explains.

“Cool! You guys can get bunk beds!” El beams.

“I don’t think they’re going to get bunk beds,” Will whispers to her.

“Why not?”

“I’ll explain it to you later,” Will tells her. “It’s gross.”

The subject is dropped and the conversation moves on to what movie the kids wanted to watch before bed. They settle on *It’s a Wonderful Life* and Joyce asks Will and El to help clear the table, knowing that Hopper wanted a minute alone with Jonathan.

“I’m not going to hurt her,” Hopper says out of nowhere, looking across the table at Jonathan.

“I know,” he admits. “She’s seemed happier these past few months.”

“I’m also not going to try and parent you. You’re an adult who can make your own decisions. I do, however, want you to be comfortable with this.”

“If you hurt her, you’re a dead man.”

“Message received,” Hopper nods. He folds his hands in his lap and leans back in his chair.

“I mean it, I’ve got friends in high places.”

“If you’re talking about Harrington, I wouldn’t brag about that,” Hopper chuckles. He notices Jonathan’s smirk and decides to call the conversation a win.

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With Hopper changed out of his uniform and the kids in the Christmas pyjamas Joyce insisted they purchase, they settle down in front of the television to watch a movie. El had already placed a plate of cookies and a glass of milk on the table for Santa and warned Hopper that he better not eat Santa’s cookies. Joyce wraps her shirt around her waist, one of Hopper’s old flannels that she’d begun wearing while he was missing and cuddles into his side. Jonathan had excused himself to go and see Nancy, El and Will were seated on the ground in front of the couch and Joyce and Hopper took up the couch.

The kids watch the movie in silence, presumably exhausted from the day of festivities, and Hopper dozes off ten minutes into the movie. Joyce takes a moment to take it all in. The snow falling was now fluffier and less aggressive than the snow falling earlier that evening and the lights on the tree illuminated the living room in a cozy glow of colours. A strange sense of calm washes over Joyce. Hopper is asleep on her shoulder, Will and El silently watching the movie. They’d all come so far.

When the movie ends, she gently shakes Hopper awake and he carries El off to bed. She ushers Will to bed and goes to make tea

while Hopper reads El a bedtime story, something else they'd begun doing when he returned. Even on nights when he worked late, he always managed to read her a short story before bed. She knows he secretly loved doing it. El was growing up alarmingly fast and it was the one thing he was holding onto.

Hopper finds Joyce on the couch again, sipping on her drink while watching the winter wonderland outside. Silently, he joins her and puts an arm around her. She leans into him and breathes him in.

She looks up at him with wide brown eyes and is surprised to find him already looking down at her. He shakes his head and smiles.

“What?” she asks with an amused smirk.

“Nothing, it's just... I was always kind of hoping it would be me and you in the end.”

Author's Note:

Please leave a review!